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ABSTRACT

Fear of poor teaching and low national test scores have spawned a back to basics movement and a shift from the use of tests as predictors and models to that of assessment and achievement. This movement may have positive impact on the teaching of English, which previously has not lent itself well to standardized testing. Although many English teachers do not believe college entrance scores represent students' abilities or skills learned in class, most feel the teacher is responsible for preparing students to take standardized tests. English teachers have failed to become involved in establishing local objectives and assessment of specifics. Consequently, focus has been on raising scores and standards without assurance of what constitutes a high school curriculum. High school emphasis on career education and minimum competencies has fragmented the facets of English into the realm of other departments and endangered the teaching of literature. The testing movement may result in harmonizing the different philosophies in English and may provide a conceptual model and structure of purpose and standards for basic competencies in oral and written communication. It may also increase competency in college English by eliminating the inexperienced graduate student as teacher. Testing also has positive implications as a source of information for curriculum changes to accommodate shifts in student ranks. (HTH)

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TESTING: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DISCIPLINE OF ENGLISH

D. Dean Cantrell

In 1899 upon the occasion of the creation of the College Entrance Examination Board, Columbia University President Nicholas Murray Butler, one of ten members of the founding committee, observed: We have developed "a source of strength, the full power of which has yet to be tested in ways that we cannot now foresee." [1] Eighty-one years later his statement is as prophetic as it was then. Having seen its original membership of fourteen colleges and universities multiply into thousands, having tested millions of students, and having broadened and diversified its services to meet the demands of the time, the CEEB is as much the center of controversy as we enter the decade of the eighties as it was at the beginning of this century. With the January 1980 long-awaited and widely publicized attack of consumer advocate Ralph Nader, the country seems already to have labelled the decade of the eighties as "Testing Time for Tests." [2]

Over the years the controversies, of course, have had many dimensions and their causes have been multi-faceted. Always an emotionalized issue, standardized testing has most recently been under a storm of attack primarily as a result of events in the 1960's. As an aftermath of the civil rights movement and the revived feminist movement, the testing industry seems to have won the battle during the past decade in disproving test bias, in apparently establishing its product as accurate predictors of academic performance, and in identifying the source of the problem as an inferior pre-college education. I say apparently being fully aware that Allan Nairn, chief author of Ralph Nader's scurrilous attack, asserted that the SAT was usually no better than "a pair of dice" in forecasting how well students would perform in college. [3] The

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testing industry, nevertheless, has so responsibly met the American public's aroused concern that famed seer Jean Dixon's highly publicized 1978 prediction has not materialized. She observed: "The level of learning in schools will again decline this year. National test scores will shock millions of parents. There will be student demonstrations against ignorance. Teachers and principals will be sued for failure to teach basic knowledge to their pupils."

Her prediction, however, was close enough to reflect a scare which has had alarming consequences, for it resulted in the American people's reaffirmation of testing. A Gallup poll, for example, found that 83% of Americans want "test scores" to be the determinate factor for college admissions and 65% of those responding to a recent survey wanted exit examinations for high school graduation. More important to the discipline of English, the scare spawned the back-to-basics movement out of which emerged the popularity of criterion-referenced testing over norm-referenced and a dramatic shift from the use of tests as predictors and selective models to that of assessment and achievement. It is in these later developments that the discipline of English seems most vitally affected.

The role our discipline has played thus far in protecting or even laying claim to any special place in the numerous controversial issues has been a relatively quiet and restrained one. Considerable interest, it goes without saying, has been focused on the Test for Standard Written English (TSWE), exit exams, the reinstitution of college level proficiency exams, the mechanical grading of compositions, and, at least, vocal concern over Criterion Reference Testing. If one checks, however, the first ten years of Research in the Teaching of English, 1967-1977, one discovers only fifteen articles out of 176 or 9% on evaluation and should one check the 1978-1979 articles, one discovers

only two out of 171, or less than .03%, are on testing. Given the currency of the testing controversy, one might have thought more research on evaluation methods would have been done. Our profession has most notably responded by holding conferences, at which resolutions have been passed, much as the April 1, 1978 Resolution on Testing of the Conference on College Composition and Communication.[4] It called for the requirement of writing samples for each test on written English; with English teachers in control; the availability of ample test information; and insistence on the understanding that the development of writing skills is the responsibility of the entire faculty. Its last item is a promise of the CCCC's intention to provide in the future information about testing and assistance to composition instructors (emphasis mine). The National Council Teachers of English, of course, has its Committee to Evaluate Curriculum Guidelines and Competency Requirement. The Council has had notable success in persuading the CEEB to restore writing samples to its Composition Test and College Level Examination Program (CLEP), though it refused at San Diego to adopt a resolution to eliminate sexist language from tests because of its fear that if such a resolution were passed it would appear that the organization favored standardized testing. Apparently, as English teachers we are primarily responsible for our restrained role. When, for example, at a program planning session of The South Atlantic Association of Departments of English, testing was proposed, one member responded, "Why, there's nothing we can do; it's a settled case; the federal courts have responded." The equally controversial but less provocative topic of reading appeared in our program guide for that year.

As Majorie Farmer said in February of 1979: "We have not given advice and suggestions solidly based on our knowledge and our experience with the

language development of learners at all ages."[5] She observed that some legislation then, however well meaning, promotes testing in ways that seem to interfere with progress instead of measuring it.

In other words, as professionals our efforts to dispel the myths which are prevalent about education and measurement often go untouted. Whereas Edwin Newman's Strictly Speaking made the best seller's list and Admiral Rickover's educational theories hit the national news, the American public may not be hearing the voice of the 90,000 membered, 130 affiliated NCTE. Even though NCTE has provided testimony for legislative bodies, has participated in national consortia on testing, was unofficially involved in the earliest discussions of legislation for truth in testing, and has been encouraged to work with the new U. S. Department of Education in sharing knowledge of what's essential about education, still reports to the membership often reflect mild surprise over officialdom's willingness to be influenced in the implementation of legislation by our professional advice.

Why has the English profession been so reluctant to be a force in the testing crisis? It's not because of lack of interest, or because of an inherent dislike of anything mathematical, or lack of a public forum for expression. It is rather a result of our training and preparation. One implication is that within this decade English teachers will know more about the history, composition, analysis, and interpretation of score distribution than during any previous generation. As the testing industry in the seventies called attention to the necessity of responsible test usage, so in the eighties teachers and students' attention will be focused on "test preparedness." From this will come a positive gain with an increased appreciation for standardized testing.

One positive gain that merits constant reminders, for example, grew out of the very first examinations of the College Entrance Examination Board in June 1901. Administered to 973 students, the examination, consisting of 2 to 2 1/2 hour essays on a range of questions, were graded by a select group of school and college teachers assembled in New York. Such a furor arose over the examination in the discipline of English that, in an effort to gain uniformity of admission requirements, the National Education Association in 1895 appointed a Committee on College Entrance Requirements to discuss matters pertaining to English requirements for college admission. This committee eventually became in December 1911 the National Council of Teachers of English. It bears remembering, than, that such a consequence as NCTE is a monument to the positive features of testing. It bears remembering also that the same arguments heard today about entrance examinations in English were voiced then: they brought from the students the merest fluff and ravelings of the adolescent mind, revealing neither the students' independent thought, nor their command of English; they would turn the high schools into "mere coaching schools;" they provoked complaints more from teachers than from students; and they made secondary school instruction in English "thin, peaked, and anemic."[6]

The lesson is that we have much to gain from the testing movement. One implication is that we must not allow technical competence in test research and development to outpace the English teacher. The typical English teacher may now receive little instruction in testing. At the college where I teach though a course is offered it is not required, nor am I advocating that it should be, given the already large number of hours--forty-two--mandated in the education sequence. Somewhere in those already designated hours the future teacher of English must be given adequate instruction in measurement. What

this means, of course, is that given the rapidly expanding knowledge of this century deemed essential for the competent English teacher, we are moving rapidly ahead to the practical solution of having a fifth college year added to teacher preparation.

Not only must English teachers be knowledgeable in psychometry but they must prepare students for the actualities of testing. No longer should the stock advice to a student preparing to take a test be: "Go home, go to bed early, and get a good night's sleep." Teachers must simulate test-taking conditions, must replicate, for example, at times standard objective test form --i.e., in the testing of vocabulary, the use of synonyms, antonyms, sentence completion, etc.; they must develop specific thinking skills in their students and show how mechanical factors can affect scoring. The implication of all this is not that concern with developing such skills is excessive, or in danger of encroaching upon a fundamental element of curriculum or that it is teaching for the test. Research shows that students who have practiced test-taking and have received encouragement about their testing abilities and performance have a definite competitive edge. Even though research exists to show that many English teachers do not believe that college entrance scores truly represent either the abilities of students or the skills they are taught in class, nevertheless most teachers feel that they are responsible for preparing students to take them.[7]

Out of this newly acquired test technology must come a readiness on the part of English teachers to be engaged locally in the setting of standards or percentiles. As the competency based program has gathered momentum, the growing fear is that it may indeed turn the public schools into producing a generation of minimal mediocrity. Practically every article written on com-

petency testing is negative. Part of the problem in our discipline resides in a failure of English teachers to be involved to a significant degree with administrators in the establishment of local objectives and in the assessment of specifics.

A more omnious consequence of the back-to-basics movement to the discipline other than its insistence on the mastery of test technology is its impact on the curriculum. In all too many school districts as concerned parents have reacted to the phenomenon of declining test scores, attention has been focused upon learning the essentials and raising scores and standards without any real assurance of what constitutes the high school English curriculum. Though Willard Wirtz's blue ribbon panel, commissioned to determine the cause of the precipitous decline in SAT scores, pointed out that a contributing factor to score decline might be the addition of popular English classes such as radio/television/film/and science fiction which are less demanding than "regular" English courses, such as those most of us know as English III or English IV, his committee did not recommend the elimination of English electives.[8] Nevertheless, the high school English curriculum has indeed suffered at a time when it should have been strengthened as a result of the testing movement. For example, as tests carry an inherent belief that there is a body of knowledge that may and must be conveyed and is measurable by objective standards, there has been a sharp return to a college curriculum which has in the past been considered the core of education--the liberal arts. Scores of colleges across the United States--from Harvard to Stanford, from Northwestern to the University of Georgia--have looked closely at their academic offerings and redesigned them to end the laxity of the late 1960's and early 1970's. As college English

departments have embraced innovations, retained gloriously enriching electives, the high schools have been more inclined to emphasize career education and to be concerned more over the identification of minimum competencies. The fear is, of course, the deprivation in the curriculum of all that is free, innovative and productive.

That which seems most vulnerable is the teaching of literature. In fact a NCTE committee examining competency test discovered a Northeastern state test that made no mention at all of literature.[9] As American high schools have struggled to retain courses in poetry and the novel, teachers have seen the demand for literature decline precipitously. It is almost as though we are witnessing our demise. For the severest implication of the testing movement for our discipline may be more fragmentation. A few years ago on the college level we bade farewell to oral English, allowing speech departments to appropriate that domain; to reading, allowing education departments and/or special departments to appropriate that area; almost to written English as some in our discipline opted for the demise of what we know as traditional freshman composition, wishing to allow sociology, history, or political science teachers to appropriate that domain, since, as the theory is expounded, they could best teach freshmen how to do the writing they'll be called upon to do later in their careers, the implication being that English teachers could teach only literary analysis for which there is only minimal occasion. Of course, only a few years ago departments of linguistics mushroomed and at some schools separate departments exist for English and American literature. And film study, from its inception a few years ago, has never been firmly rooted in the English department. What all this signifies, of course, is that we may be presiding over the imminent farewell of literature

to psychology and religion departments.

That literature offerings should be strengthened now would on the surface seem to have gained momentum from the recent movement for moral education. Since the study of literature, long considered the raison d'etre of our discipline, may have for a major concern the teaching of values, one might have thought, given Lawrence Kohlberg and Ralph Mosher's calls for creation of optimum school environments to make pupils good that a major emphasis would be placed on our discipline. To my knowledge, such is not the case.

Another point for consideration is the work of NCTE in endorsing a widely printed "The Essentials of Education." In addressing itself to what is essential to education, it states:

> In all subjects, students develop skills in using language and other symbol systems; they develop the ability to reason; they undergo experiences that lead to emotional and social maturity. Students master these skills and abilities through observing, listening, reading, talking, and writing about science, mathematics, history and the social sciences, the arts, and other aspects of our intellectual, social, and cultural heritage. [10]

A noticeable omission is that of literature! If we fail even to mention literature, who then can salvage this, the most vital part of our discipline?

Another concern growing out of the testing movement is so basic to education that it is always surprising to see the various and unexpected ways it rears its head. Foremost among the primary perceptions of education and testing should be an agreement over educational goals. What is to be tested is a momentous question, indeed striking at the very heart of our discipline and

every other. There has been a consistent failure to tie testing concepts and practices firmly to instructional objectives. Standardized testing implies that learners should be tested for what is taught. Tests ought to measure that which is a direct outcome of learning and development. However, a general lack of agreement exists among educators as to the purpose of education. Is it to develop verbal knowledge? to foster learning? to teach democracy? to acquaint oneself with one's destiny? Is NCTE correct in its "Essentials of Education" that "Educators agree that the overreaching goal of education is to develop informed, thinking citizens capable of participating in both domestic and world affairs?"[11]

Such general lack of consensus over educational goals pinpoints what has been obvious for years to English teachers--i.e., our discipline lacks a theory. The English curriculum allows itself to be shaped and defined by socialization processes; lacking is a conceptual model of English as a discipline from which changes may come. Too, a problem exists in the lack of any standards for basic competencies in oral and written communication. One implication then is that the testing movement in the 1980's may indeed result in harmonizing varying philosophies of English and at least in providing a structure for the continual discussion of the purpose of education and the proper place for the study of English.

With continued interest in testing, hopefully we can look forward not only to the reinstitution of the core curriculum but also a commitment to a rigorous academic standard that emphasizes less attention to career education and the open classroom and more attention to strongly oriented academic classes. One would like to think also the old practice of student ownership of textbooks

might be reinstated, but such is beyond fiscal vision. As standardized testing remains strong, teachers should receive recognition and support which might be instrumental in eliminating one of the nation's most serious concerns, student apathy.

Such teaching on the high school level mandates a revolutionary movement in the teaching of English on the university level. College freshmen will no longer be satisfied with instructors drawn from the rank of graduate student. As students will no longer accept the reason for taking a test "because I told you so" so they no longer will be satisfied to leave the high school classroom and a committed, experienced teacher to accept an inexperienced, over-extended graduate student as instructor. Our profession must find a way to assist young graduate students but at the same time guarantee that its ranks at the university level are filled with qualified, fully employed instructors whose whole commitment is to teaching. At the same time the solution must preserve the university's freshman composition program.

Though one might have thought that a change in our educational system's fundamental basis would have been forthcoming from the enormous attention devoted to testing, such is not the case. Although it has been predicted that within this decade some one-half of student enrollment will have some experience in self-pacing, no revolution is in sight in our basic structure of group instruction within fixed time periods. Nor does the time seem appropriate for the creation of new guidelines nor faculty work loads. A paring of the numbers of students enrolled in class, credit for tutorials, a reduction of hours of instruction to allow more time for individualized teaching might have been gained in 1977-1978 when public attention was at a white heat over declining

test scores, but as those scores have leveled off and as the cost of education rises there seems little to be gained by asking for more reasonable work loads.

With 99% of junior colleges and 50% of senior colleges having open admissions, tests are not so necessary now for predictive, selective purposes. With declining enrollments and the emergence of non-traditional students, tests are not nearly so close to the British's "arbiter of social mobility." Rather aptitude tests are giving way to achievement and assessment and the emphasis is now on equivalency testing, credit by examination, CLEP and Advanced Placement. Hopefully, following the long painful experience many colleges had originally in setting percentiles for granting credit in CLEP, most English departments will be locally involved in the establishment of scores, in the evaluation of written samples and for preservation of the discipline so that breadth of knowledge may not be sacrificed for sheer minimal competencies. As more non-traditional students enroll, requesting credit for non-traditional, non-academic experiences, we must be competent enough to interpret and use wisely and maturely the test results so as not to deprive a student of a rich and varied experience available in a traditional classroom structure. A better solution may indeed be the local development of equivalency testing for non-traditional students.

Probably the most positive gain will be in the strengthening of AP, the most reliable of equivalency measures and a program now twenty-five years old that is often described as adding "strength and sparkle to entire schools." The drawback here has been that AP is available only in high schools which can afford it so that less advantaged students lack opportunity. AP has the single greatest appeal if students use credit to enhance, not abbreviate, their college education. One implication may be the initiation of honors programs as well as

entire freshmen year programs at colleges not having such to meet the challenge of well-prepared students.

Though testing still evokes disdain, hostility and fear, though its advocates see it as undemocratic and anti-humanitarian, though many fear nationally developed standards of academic achievement, and many still contend tests do permanent psychic damage to students, the latter substantiated only anecdotally, they still have positive implications for us. They need not be the Vitrum of Ruin.

With all their imperfections, they are and have been valuable sources of information. For example, much of what we know about racial, ethnic and sexual differences in educational achievement comes from standardized testing. Little doubt exists that testing has been significant in discovering and developing talent. With the recent prediction of the Carnegie Council on Public Policy Issues that within the next twenty years more women and minorities will enter the college ranks so that women will outnumber men and colleges will need to tailor-make curricula to meet student demands, undoubtedly the results and analysis of test material will be a vital instrument when it comes time to make curricula changes to accommodate sexual differences in the learning process.

Rather than decrying their use, we should utilize the knowledge gained therein. For example, out of composition testing may indeed come, given enough writing samples, truly objective test to measure writing skills. With more support from the profession, measures that provide information about vocational, social, interpersonal competencies, creativity, and cognitive style may be forthcoming.

As external measures, standardized tests provide hard evidence of achieve-

ment. Assuredly such is sometimes uncomfortable to receive. We would do well to keep in mine a comment of William W. Turnbull, the president of Educational Testing Service: "We are makers of gates and other people have to decide whether to open them or not. Gates serve to get people through fences, as well as to keep them out." Standardized tests for the English profession may indeed be gates. Assuredly some comfort may be found in a paraphrase of Nicholas Murray Butler's observation many years ago: Testing is a source of strength whose full power we cannot now foresee.

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[11]Ibid.